

**STATEMENT OF**  
**BLAKE ORTNER, ASSOCIATE LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR**  
**PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA**  
**BEFORE THE**  
**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**  
**ON THE STATE OF VETERANS' EMPLOYMENT**

**FEBRUARY 5, 2003**

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Evans, members of the Committee, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) is pleased to present our views on the current state of veterans' employment. PVA would like to thank you, Mr. Chairman, for scheduling this hearing and including not only employment issues, but also Transition Assistance Programs and the challenges faced by veteran small business owners in their dealings with Federal procurement prescribed by P.L. 106-50.

PVA is the only national veterans' service organization, chartered by Congress to represent and advocate on behalf of our members and all Americans with spinal cord injury or disease. All of PVA's members, in each of the fifty states and Puerto Rico, are veterans with spinal cord injury or dysfunction. These veterans suffer from catastrophic injury and disease and face challenges every day in their quest to survive and function fully in society. Because of the unique nature of their disabilities, the challenge of employment for catastrophically disabled veterans is often seen as almost insurmountable. Our nation is still strewn with barriers to those with disabilities. These barriers are not always the lack of curb cuts or working elevators in a metro station. The most embedded barriers are in the minds and hearts of individuals who see those with disabilities, and especially veterans with disabilities, as less valuable or deserving. This is a challenge the members of this Committee will have to overcome as you try to provide for our veterans. This is especially true as this Nation prepares once again to send men and women into harms way.

The challenges to those with disabilities are often due to barriers in the workplace, false perceptions of the potential costs to employers of hiring people with disabilities, and the perceptions many people still have about veterans. Veterans have earned and deserve consideration within the workforce. We hope that as P.L. 107-288, the Jobs for Veterans Act, is implemented, it will breakdown these barriers and promise much deserved opportunities in the workplace.

December 2002 unemployment figures released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) demonstrate these challenges veterans face. While average employment in the Nation is approximately equal for veterans and non-veterans, some groups of veterans have much higher rates. The unemployment figures for December show over a 2% higher rate for total female veterans over 20 years old when compared to the same age group of female non-veterans. This is dramatically different when examining the age group 20-24. For this group, the rate is 13.7% for male and female veterans compared to an 8.8% rate for non-veterans in the same age group. But for females alone, the rate is 27.9%, over three times the level for female non-veterans. Though these numbers are not seasonally adjusted, such a disparity needs to be explained. PVA eagerly awaits the Calendar Year 2002 figures that will be released later this week.

Assisting veterans with job training and placement into employment following military service is an important benefit that all service members are entitled to and deserve. It is the responsibility of Congress to fund veterans programs and multiple federal agencies to prepare veterans to enter the civilian workforce upon leaving the military. It is unconscionable to use our veterans, pat them on the back and say thank you as we escort them out the door. Never is this more important than today as we prepare for another conflict with Iraq and the continuing war on terrorism.

The Department of Labor (DOL) and the Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS) continue to make efforts to help veterans find and keep gainful employment. But tight budgets limit the ability of VETS to expand programs to help veterans, especially

disabled veterans, achieve employment. PVA is encouraged by news that the Administration's FY 2004 budget will show an increase for VETS. But it is only a start. More funding is necessary if we truly want to see our veterans served. For many years, those opposed to increased funding for veterans programs have justified it by pointing to the decreasing number of veterans in America, using statistics showing World War II veterans dying at approximately 1100 per day. As we mobilize more and more National Guard and Reservists for current and future crises, the number of veterans will increase dramatically. If we as a nation are willing to provide funding for our soldiers, airman, sailors and marines to fight, we must be prepared to provide for them after their service.

We must also ensure that our veterans have priority of service. As we move to increase the efficiencies of the employment system, we must be sure we do not leave our veterans behind. This is especially true for disabled and chronically unemployed veterans. This has been a concern of VSO's for many years. It is a continuing fight as we find ourselves advocating for the rights of veterans, even in the Department of Homeland Security. Veterans have been providing homeland security for over 200 years. It seems this is often forgotten as agencies look to streamline functions and look for efficiencies.

Although PVA applauds the efforts of the Department of Labor, the issue of priority of service for veterans remains. The requirement to provide job opportunities to veterans first, through DVOPs/LVERs at the Employment Service, is in many ways contradictory to the Employment Service's role of getting individuals employed. But the desire to provide services to as many as possible cannot overshadow the attention to the specialized needs of

veterans, especially disabled veterans. Part of PVA's concern with allowing DVOPs/LVERs to be non-veterans is that these employees of the employment service will have no connection to veterans and will only be beholden to the director of the employment service. The requirement for an annual report of non-veterans filling these positions is an empty gesture. PVA can understand the approach, and there are sufficient anecdotes to demonstrate the benefits for hiring the best-qualified individual. We simply fear the continued erosion of veterans' involvement in veterans' employment for the sake of efficiency alone. Perhaps this will be dealt with by a comprehensive performance accountability system to measure the performance of veterans' employment and training staff. The emphasis on placing severely disabled veterans and other veterans facing barriers to employment may help to prevent some forms of "cherry picking." Though it is unpleasant to accept, when someone's job is at risk, human nature may cause the employment specialist to select the easy placement, over the one requiring greater effort. This may be even more dramatic when that person has no connection whatsoever to veterans. As PVA stated during our testimony last year on H.R. 4015, which would become P.L. 107-288, "this is an evolutionary step in the veterans' employment system. We do not see this as an end, but rather as one more step in helping our veterans gain the opportunity for full employment."

Over time PVA and other veterans service organizations have pushed for legislation granting veterans increased opportunities for small business ownership. Members of the Committee were instrumental in helping push for the passage of P.L. 106-50, the Veterans Entrepreneurship and Small Business Development Act of 1999. But this was only the

first step. Section 502 of the Act directed that a “Government-wide goal for participation by small business concerns owned and controlled by service-disabled veterans shall be established at not less than 3 percent of the total value of all prime contract and subcontract awards for each fiscal year.” The result of this goal can only be described as a failure. Most agencies do not even reach a 1% level for contracts, and many are far worse. Of particular note in FY 2001, the Office of the President had a total of zero contracts for zero dollars toward service-disabled veterans’ contracts. But perhaps even more distressing is that the State Department provided 1.17% of their contracts to service-disabled veterans while the Department of Defense provided only 1/3 of 1% (.34%). If any agency would provide greater numbers of contracts to service-disabled veterans, you would think it would be DOD. There have been many excuses for why agencies have not reached their goals: they need more time; there aren’t sufficient service-disabled veterans businesses out there; or that they are doing the best they can. All these explanations ring hollow as we prepare for a new war. To those who argue that it is so difficult to find opportunities for our veterans small business owners, PVA says it is time to try harder. There are no businesses in this Nation that are more deserving of government contracts than those who have been disabled as part of their military service. Only stronger requirements to provide contracts to disabled veterans businesses will overcome the intransigence of contracting officers comfortable with their current list of contractors. We thank members of Congress who are seeking legislation with methods and techniques to open new avenues for disabled veterans’ business owners. We particularly thank Mr. Evans for introducing H.R. 5583 during the 107<sup>th</sup> Congress. We look forward to its reintroduction. PVA knows that there will again be obstacles placed in the way of this legislation. PVA fully supports you and

will provide whatever support to help pass this valuable benefit for our nation's veterans and our citizens with disabilities.

The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) continues to be one of the most valuable programs for individuals leaving active duty. Changes to the program over the last several years including the addition of programs on self-employment and small business ownership have made this program one of the most successful transition programs to date. It provides departing service members with the information they need to hit the ground running as they enter their new civilian lives. This is important. Military service takes you out of the workforce. It is imperative that the nuances of the workplace unknown to an 18-year-old enlistee are made clear to them. The drive and motivation present in the recently discharged will serve them well, but only if they can get through the door of an employer. But we are still not reaching everyone. It has always been a challenge to serve those individuals on ships and those deployed overseas. We have to find effective ways to overcome those barriers.

The Department of Defense estimates potentially as many as 20,000 personnel are discharged overseas. There are many reasons for these discharges, but none of them are justification for our service members not receiving the valuable training and services provided by the TAP programs. The challenge to VETS is how to fund these services that are vitally important to our overseas troops. PVA recommends VETS look at several options. One option could be direct funding of VETS employees overseas at major bases. Other options may include contracting with private providers or through joint DOD/DOL

programs. Regardless of the method, VETS should immediately investigate an effective way to provide these services.

As we gear up for war and our economy continues to stumble, employment is becoming more of a challenge for all of our citizens. However we continue to have an obligation to ensure that those who have served this country can hope for a smoother and successful transition to civilian life when they return home. They deserve every assistance, whether in gainful employment or small business opportunities, expressing the thanks of a grateful Nation.

Mr. Chairman, I thank you and the Committee for its efforts to provide for our veterans. I would be happy to answer any questions that you might have.



**Information Required by Rule XI 2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives**

Pursuant to Rule XI 2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, the following information is provided regarding federal grants and contracts.

**Fiscal Year 2002**

Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, administered by the Legal Services Corporation—  
National Veterans Legal Services Program—\$179,000 (estimated).

**Fiscal Year 2001**

Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, administered by the Legal Services Corporation—  
National Veterans Legal Services Program—\$242,000.

**Fiscal Year 2000**

General Services Administration—Preparation and presentation of seminars regarding  
implementation of the Americans With Disabilities Act, 42 U.S.C. §12101, and  
requirements of the Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards—\$30,000.

Federal Aviation Administration—Accessibility consultation--\$12,500.

Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, administered by the Legal Services Corporation—  
National Veterans Legal Services Program—\$200,000.

## BIOGRAPHY OF BLAKE C. ORTNER

Blake Ortner is an Associate Legislative Director for Paralyzed Veterans of America representing PVA to federal agencies including the Department of Labor, Office of Personnel Management, Department of Defense, HUD and the VA. In addition, he is PVA's representative on issues such as Gulf War Illness, homeless veterans and coordinates issues with other Veteran Service Organizations. He also often serves on special projects such as disability advisor for the dedication ceremonies of the Korean War Veterans Memorial.

He has served as the Chair for the Subcommittee on Disabled Veterans (SODV) of the President's Committee on the Employment of People with Disabilities (PCEPD) and as a member of the Department of Labor's Advisory Committee on Veterans' Employment and Training (VETS) and the Veterans Organizations Homeless Council (VOHC).

A native of Moorhead, Minnesota, he attended the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis on an Army Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) scholarship, graduating in 1983 with an International Relations degree. He was commissioned as a Regular Army Infantry second lieutenant stationed at Ft. Lewis, WA. Following service with the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, he became a member of the Army's Ranger Regiment.

He continues his military service as the battalion commander of 3-116<sup>th</sup> IN, Virginia Army National Guard and returned in April 2002 from a 9-month deployment as part of the SFOR 10 peacekeeping mission to Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Mr. Ortner resides in Stafford, VA and is married with two children.